

The Best Part of Waking Up...

Mark 1:29-39

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A sweet little boy surprised his grandmother one morning and brought her a cup of coffee. He made it himself and was so proud. The boy anxiously waited to hear what his grandmother thought of the coffee. The truth is, the coffee was awful. As the grandmother forced down the last sip she noticed three of those little green toy soldiers in the bottom of the cup.

She asked, "Honey, why would three little green army men be in the bottom of my cup?"

Her grandson replied, "You know Grandma, it's like on TV, 'The best part of waking up, is soldiers in your cup.'"

I must admit, there is something special about starting each day with the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee, though I prefer Folgers over soldiers! That fresh pot of coffee is a part of my daily routine, preceded only by feeding the cat and letting the dogs out. In our house ne'er a day goes by that doesn't start with a pot of coffee.

Maybe you're not a coffee drinker. Maybe there is something else that marks the start of each day, like orange juice (after all, a day without orange juice is like a day without sunshine!).

My observation is that, of all the times in the day, the time in which we are most likely to observe some kind of ritual with consistency, is the beginning of the day, when we first wake up. Even people who wouldn't claim to be creatures of habit probably have the same pattern of behavior when they first wake up. Once the day gets going, there may be no real pattern to what we do; but when we first wake up, we have a set way of doing things.

As far as I know, Jesus didn't have the advantage of starting his day with a cup of coffee. (He could turn water into wine, but that wasn't something he was likely to do when he first woke up!) Even so, in our text from Mark's gospel this morning we get a glimpse into how Jesus started his day. The text itself picks up where we left off last week, with Jesus leaving the synagogue. He then goes to Simon Peter's house, where he healed Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus spends the evening healing the teeming mass of people who have gathered at Peter's doorstep.

Then notice where verse 35 picks up. We find Jesus very early in the morning, before the sun rises. Jesus gets up and goes to a place where he can be alone.

And he prays.

Jesus begins his day with prayer.

As people who try to be followers of Jesus, we need to pay attention to the pattern of Jesus' life. We need to pattern our lives after the way Jesus lived his life. If Jesus started his day with prayer, don't you think it would be a good thing for us to do, as well?

Mark dedicates only one verse to the description of Jesus at prayer. Nevertheless, from that one verse I would like to lift up three things that prayer should be for us.

First of all, prayer should be *intentional*. It should be something that we plan to do. Sure, there will be times when prayer is spontaneous--moments of great joy that result in sudden prayers of thanksgiving, or moments of deep despair that cause us to cry out for help. There will be times when prayer is spontaneous, but that does not take the place of intentional, habitual prayer.

Mark points out that Jesus got up, left the house, and went to a solitary place, where he prayed. It is no coincidence that Jesus prayed. It is no spur-of-the-moment impulse. Jesus awoke and went out with a specific purpose in mind: to pray. For Jesus, prayer was a priority; prayer was *intentional*, not accidental.

For Jesus, prayer was an appointment that he kept with God. Cynthia Hale tells of Bertram Polloch, Bishop of Norwich. "The life of a Bishop is a very busy one, with people coming and going all the time, clamoring for your attention. Bishop Polloch had certain times set aside for prayer. No matter who came to see him at those times, they were told that he could not be interrupted because he had 'an appointment with God.'"¹ That story reminds me of the time when my former church in Midland, Texas, was searching for a new head of staff. After the congregation had called the new pastor, Steve Schorr, I was visiting with the chairman of the Pastor Nominating Committee. He remarked that one of the things that made a powerful impression was a day he had called Steve's church to speak to him. The secretary told the PNC chairman that Steve couldn't come to the phone right then, because he was in prayer.

O, that every one of us had that kind of determination! O, that prayer would be that kind of *intentional* priority in our daily lives!

Prayer after the pattern of Jesus is to be *intentional*.

Prayer is also to be "*attentional*." (I know, "attentional" is not really a word, but I use it here to describe prayer as an act of paying attention.) Mark tells us that Jesus left the house while it was still dark, and went to a solitary place. In other words, Jesus made a point of going off to a place where he could be alone with God. Jesus found a place where he would not be distracted by other people, a place where he could give his full attention to God. For Jesus, prayer was "*attentional*." He cleared his mind of clutter, and he found a time and a space when he could be with God without being interrupted.

Do you have a quiet space where you can go to be with God? Do you have a specific time when you can be free of distractions and give all your attention to God?

I try to make time every morning for scripture reading and prayer. Sometimes it works better than others. Some mornings, I am able to wake up before everybody else, and be alone with my Bible, and a cup of coffee, and the Lord. And on those days I feel like I am better able to listen to what the Lord says to me. But there are some mornings when I hit the snooze button on my alarm clock too many times. I still get up and try to read the scriptures and spend time in prayer, but I am much less able to be attentive to what God might be saying, because everybody else is awake and getting ready for the day. For my prayer time to be the most fruitful, I need to be "*attentional*."

Prayer after the pattern of Jesus is *intentional* and "*attentional*." Prayer after the pattern of Jesus is also *connectional*. Prayer draws us into God's presence. Prayer is the way we relate to God.

There are times in the gospels when we know the content of Jesus' prayer. For example, in the gospel of John, Jesus prays with his disciples in the upper room on the night before his crucifixion; John records the entire prayer for us.² In the Garden of Gethsemane, we know that Jesus prayed, "Abba, Father, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done."³

Yet here in the first chapter of Mark's gospel, we don't know the content of Jesus' prayer; we simply know that Jesus prayed. And that's enough for us. You see, prayer is an end in itself, not simply a means to some other end. Some people look at prayer as a way to demand what we want from God, or to tell God how to do his job. But prayer, at its most basic, is the soul seeking communion with God. Prayer is our seeking to connect to God, to be in the presence of God, to share our wants and our needs with God, our joys and our sorrows. And prayer is also our listening in silence, seeking God's presence and God's direction for our lives.

Allan Cole, my professor of pastoral care at Austin Seminary, has just written a book on prayer. In it, he says that "Prayer can have a significant effect on those who pray. Foremost, prayer helps you become more aware of God, of God's presence in your own life and in the lives of others, and of God's activity in the world."⁴

Prayer is *connectional*. Prayer is the tie that binds us to the Lord. Prayer is the way we wait upon the Lord, and it is the way the Lord renews our strength. Prayer is our lifeline with God.

I love the verses from the 40th chapter of Isaiah that Bruce read earlier. They are verses that speak to those who are weary and faint with grief and the struggles of life. Surely you know weariness and fatigue and sorrow. We've all faced times like that in our lives: a gut-wrenching recession, a life suddenly turned south, your own illness or that of someone you love, attending to a parent in the slow decline of dementia, the gradual dissolution of a family... We've all faced times when there is nothing more we can do than wait. But when in your waiting your heart turns toward God in prayer, then you'll know what it means to lean back and rest in the everlasting arms of God. In the end, that is what prayer does for us. Prayer doesn't mean we will always get what we want. Prayer doesn't mean that all our diseases will be cured, and that nothing bad will ever happen to us. But prayer does take us into the presence of God, where we will find assurance of God's steadfast and unconditional love for you and for me, and where we will discover that God's purpose for us is for redemption and renewal.

How do you start your day? What's the best part of waking up?

Some of us wouldn't think of starting our day without breakfast, but we start the day without God. We wouldn't dare leave the house without a shower, but we leave without a serious time of prayer.

What's the best part of waking up for you? As good as that first cup of coffee is, wouldn't it be nice if the best part of waking up were something other than the coffee in your cup? Amen.

¹ Rev. Dr. Cynthia Hale, "Early Morning Rendezvous," www.csec.org/sermon/hale_4420.htm

² See John 17

³ See Mark 14:36, for example

⁴ Allan Hugh Cole, Jr., The Life of Prayer: Mind, Body, and Soul, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009 (pre-publication version), p. 4.